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ABSTRACT

This study presents a rationale for working with the principles of transactional analysis (TA) in the bilingual/bicultural classroom, particularly to develop the child's self-concept. The two basic premises of TA are that all human beings have a fundamental worth that is neither increased nor decreased by anything they may do or refrain from doing, and that we are responsible to a great extent for choosing our own feelings and for deciding how to act upon them. The implications of these premises for the bilingual classroom are enormous: if a child's self-concept is consistently eroded by early and continued academic failure, if the language spoken by those he loves most is treated as a second-rate idiom, and if his home culture is denigrated or ignored, the conclusions that child comes to regarding his essential worth may not be positive ones. The objectives of applying the principles of TA to the bilingual classroom include providing a nurturing environment where "positive strokes" are freely given and received by all students and by the teacher; facilitating communication by teaching new communications skills; and giving students tools they can use in taking responsibility for their own actions and reactions and stopping inappropriate reactions. When these objectives are met, student self-concept is enhanced and learning can take place more readily, pleasurably, and effectively. (EJS)

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YO ESTOY BIEN, TU ESTAS BIEN: AN INTRODUCTION TO TA IN THE BILINGUAL CLASSROOM

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Transactional analysis (TA), first considered the exclusive property of an elitist few, then treated as merely another fad in the wave of "pop" psychology sweeping the country in the early 70s, is finally coming into its own in the classroom. Based on the teaching and writing of the late Dr. Eric Berne, TA can be a valuable tool in enhancing student self-concept and fostering an emotional climate conducive to learning. Programs incorporating its fundamental premises as well as its sometimes specialized vocabulary are being developed for student populations from pre-school to high school, and some few materials are presently available in languages other than English. To date, however, no particular effort has been made to work with the principles of transactional analysis within the special setting of the bilingual/bicultural classroom. It is the aim of this article to provide a rationale for such an effort.

Transactional analysis, as conceptualized by Berne, provides a systematic framework for looking at the various kinds of social and psychological interchanges, or transactions, that take place between any two persons. As a philosophy to be implemented, or as a discipline to be studied, it is based on two essential premises: as human beings, we all have a fundamental worth (later defined by Dr. Thomas Harris as "OK-ness") which is not increased or decreased by anything we may do or refrain from doing, and we are responsible to a great extent for choosing our own feelings as well as for deciding how to act upon them. Thus, feeling anger or sadness may be a natural reaction to a particular event, but staying mad for days or weeks or even years, or turning suffering into a life style, are deliberate, and reversible decisions. The more such decisions we make, and the earlier the ages at which we make them, the higher the prison walls we build around ourselves, constricting our capacity for love and self-expression as well as limiting the

contributions we are able to make to the world in which we live.

The implications of these two premises for the classroom, and especially for the bilingual classroom, are enormous. Obviously, if a child's self-concept is consistently eroded by early and continuing academic failure, if the language spoken by those people he loves most is treated as a second-rate idiom, and if his home culture is denigrated or ignored, the conclusions that child comes to regarding his essential worth may not be positive ones, and the decisions he makes, on the basis of these conclusions, as to how he will conduct his life may not be in his own or anyone else's best interest. As educators, we have an obligation to nurture that sense of self-worth that most small children bring with them to the school setting, to promote a healthier self-concept where this is lacking, and, finally, to give children the necessary tools for making, and continuing to make, the kinds of decisions that will serve them well throughout their lives. Transactional analysis, as presented by Berne and by the many theorists and practitioners who have followed him, provides some clear-cut and down-to-earth guidelines for working with children, as well as adults, in these particular areas.

Berne, in the course of dealing with his own clients, observed and identified three distinct kinds of behavior patterns, which he related to distinct systems of feelings and subsequently termed "ego states." Those three ego states consistently exhibited by each human being are called the Parent, the Adult, and the Child. When we are functioning in our Parent ego state, we feel, think, act, and react in the same ways that one of our parents, or other parent figures, did when we were little. This is the ego state we use in parenting our own children, and often in dealing with children in general, and it is also the ego state which performs those behavior-monitoring functions commonly associated with a "conscience." In our Adult ego state, we examine our environment objectively and assess the potentialities of a given situation on the basis of our own past experience with similar situations and any other factual information we may happen to have on hand. The Adult, in this capacity, functions rather like a computer. Finally, the Child ego state we carry

within us feels, thinks, behaves, and responds just as we did when we were little children of a certain age, normally between two and five, and will continue to do so if we live to be one hundred.

At any given moment, each of us is operating out of one, and only one, of these three ego states, although shifts between ego states may be almost instantaneous. With practice, we can learn to recognize, by words, gestures, and effects on behavior, not only our own ego states, but those of the other people with whom we deal on a daily basis. Children, by the time they enter school, have developed all three ego states to a point where the Parent and Adult as well as the Child, can be identified and addressed. We, as educators, can develop skills in interacting with children in ways that will maximize opportunities for the formation of positive values in their Parent, the thoughtful application of previous learning in their Adult, and the wonders and delights of creativity in their Child.

One common misconception concerning transactional analysis is that diligent application of its techniques will, or should, keep us in our Adult ego state all of the time. A person functioning exclusively in Adult, without regular reference to Parent and Child, would indeed be a human computer, lacking the passions and preferences that add richness to our lives. The Parent is an essential monitor as well as the repository of cherished beliefs and values, while the Child is our source of joy and spontaneity, and the full and free use of all three ego states characterizes the genuinely autonomous human being. Parent, Adult, and Child are all with each of us for life, and the decision is not whether, but when and how, to invest energy in one or the other, so that we learn to integrate them appropriately and harmoniously.

The ego state we activate at any given time, as well as those being activated by other people, determines the kinds of transactions we get into. A transaction is any unit of social interaction, as long as it contains both a stimulus and a response. As Berne defined his own approach, "Simple transactional analysis is concerned with diagnosing

which ego state implemented the transactional stimulus, and which one executed the transactional response."[1] In a complementary transaction, the response is made from the same ego state addressed by the stimulus. It is thus an expected response, and communication can continue along established lines. In a crossed transaction, the response is made from an ego state other than the one actually addressed by the stimulus, thus interrupting communication at least temporarily until new ground rules can be established.

For example, a teacher asks a student, "How many math problems do you still have to work?" or " Cuantos problemas te faltan para terminar el trabajo?" and the student answers, "Four" or "Cuatro." So far, the teacher has asked a question addressed to the student's Adult, and has received an appropriate, factual answer from that ego state. If the teacher now says, "OK, I'll give you five more minutes to work on those, and then we are going to start another unit," or, "Bueno, te doy cinco minutos para terminar. Despues, vamos a empezar otra unidad," the transaction continues, and concludes at the Adult to Adult level where it began. However, if the teacher's response is "Four! You've had twenty minutes to work on those problems! You must be daydreaming again!" or " Cuatro! Has tenido veinte minutos para acabar tu trabajo! Has de haber estado sonando, otra vez!" the transaction becomes crossed, since the teacher has moved into Parent, in this case critical, and is addressing the student's Child.

At this point, the student has three options. She can react out of Child, apologetically ("I'm sorry, ma'am, I won't do it any more," or "Lo siento, Sra. Ramirez, no lo vuelvo a hacer"), or sulkily ("That's not long enough to do all those hard old problems!" or " No me dio bastante tiempo para terminar tantos problemas tan dificiles!"), either of which will reinforce the teacher's staying in Parent and may result in several further Parent to Child transactions, since the transactions have now become complementary again. The student may also choose to respond out of Adult ("I've been working on the problems the whole time, and I think the trouble is that I still don't understand borrowing

very well," or "He estado trabajando en los problemas todo el tiempo, y creo que ha sido muy dificil porque no entiendo como quitar"), or to counterattack with Parent ("You did not give us twenty minutes -- it's only been ten! Look at the clock! You never give us as much time as you say!" or "No nos dio veinte minutos -- no mas diez! Mire el reloj! Nunca nos da tanto tiempo como nos dice!"). In either of these instances, the transaction has been crossed again, and the teacher now has the same three options which confronted the student after the first cross.

Being aware of our ego states, and using them consciously, rather than automatically to interact with others in ways that facilitate communication and cooperation, is a primary goal of transactional analysis, and it is a learned skill which can be taught even to young children. In the bilingual classroom, where communication problems may already exist as a result of language differences, the use of TA techniques can serve to forestall additional problems. The skills integral to transactional analysis enable children both to become aware of what they are thinking and feeling and to state their thoughts and feelings clearly, rather than responding automatically, outside their own awareness, with words and actions that may be inappropriate to the situation at hand and further hinder communications.

Central to the development of transactional analysis as a system of thought is the concept of strokes. If a transaction is the unit of social interaction, then a stroke is the unit of human recognition -- any act which acknowledges another's presence -- and an exchange of strokes constitutes a transaction. As babies, we literally depended on strokes for our survival, for studies have shown that institutionalized infants have died for no diagnosable cause other than the lack of human contact and touching. As adults, we still need strokes in order to function effectively.

Strokes may be verbal, nonverbal, or physical; they may be positive or negative; and they may be conditional or unconditional. A conditional stroke is one which is given for doing something, and therefore earned, such as a sharp "Stop talking!" or a Happy Face

drawn at the top of a perfect paper. An unconditional stroke is not earned, but given simply for being. Unconditional strokes are usually nonverbal or physical, such as a smile across a room, a hostile stare from a stranger, the obvious ignoring of a student's raised hand in the classroom, or a touch on the student's shoulder as the teacher walks by.

A child's self-concept is most enhanced by unconditional positive stroking, which shows acceptance of him as a worthwhile human being and one deserving of love, no matter what he does or does not do. The traditional school setting, however, lends itself much more to conditional stroking, and, the more competitive the classroom environment, the more conditional the strokes that are given and acknowledged. In a transitional bilingual program where great emphasis is placed on bringing students "up to level" and preparing them for standardized achievement tests, a child may easily come to feel that her self-worth depends on her academic performance and that failure in school diminishes her in some way as a human being. While conditional strokes have their place in promoting and recognizing scholastic achievement and keeping order in the classroom, they should by no means be the only kind of positive strokes available to the student. When they are, many students will actively seek negative strokes, realizing that they can never hope to earn many of the positive ones reserved for the eager to please and the high achievers, and feeling, rightly, that any strokes are better than none at all. Children who consistently draw attention to themselves in negative ways are generally starved for strokes, and have, at some point, decided to settle for the only kind they have learned how to get.

Providing a nurturing environment where positive strokes are freely given and readily received by all students, as well as by the teacher, is one objective of applying the principles of transactional analysis to the bilingual classroom. Facilitating communication by teaching new communications skills is another, and giving students tools they can use in taking responsibility for their own actions and reactions and stopping inappropriate reactions as well as dysfunctional behaviors is still another. When these objectives are

met, student self-concept is enhanced and learning can take place more readily, more pleasurably, and more effectively. If you would like more specific information on using TA in your own classroom, workshops on this topic are available through IDRA and can be presented in your district upon the superintendent's request.

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1. Eric Berne, Games People Play (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975), 29.